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Cultural Diversity and Australian Commercial Television Drama: Policy, Industry and Recent Research Contexts[1]

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ABSTRACT *Media studies research in the 1990s illustrated an incongruity between cultural diversity in the Australian community and the representation of that diversity on commercial television screens. Australian drama in particular received much criticism for its seemingly 'Anglo' portrayal of Australian society. Most of this former research was based on program content analysis and critical approaches to studying the media. From the mid-1990s, anecdotal evidence suggested an improvement in the casting of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. This paper contextualises policy and industry developments in the 1990s related to cultural diversity and presents new research undertaken within the commercial television drama industry. In order to determine the status of cultural diversity and commercial television drama at the end of the 1990s, a casting survey of all Australian commercial drama programs broadcast in 1999 was carried out. This was complemented by interviews with industry personnel and a two-week content analysis of programming. The research establishes the degree of casting for actors from culturally diverse backgrounds and offers explanations for both improvements made over the previous years and the continuing obstacles faced by some groups in gaining a place in our popular drama programs.*

Keywords: cultural diversity, casting, television drama, multiculturalism.

Introduction

It has been more than eight years since the Communications Law Centre[2] (CLC) prepared its report for the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA, formerly known as Actors Equity) into the representation of non-English speaking people in Australian television drama. The CLC report came shortly after research into ethnicity and the media carried out by Philip Bell[3] and during a period of research activity carried out at the University of Technology, Sydney.[4] At this time, it was estimated that less than 2% of available roles were for performers of culturally diverse backgrounds and there were no continuing roles for indigenous performers in commercial television drama.[5] In the period 1992–1995, a number of additional and significant events unfolded. The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) was established in 1992 to administer

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the new *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (BSA). Initiating a scheme of co-regulation, the ABA facilitated the self-regulation of the various media industries—and this included commercial television.

A Code of Practice for commercial television operators was also drafted in this period (1992–1993) with input from the networks, guilds and advocacy groups resulting in the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) Code of Practice.[6] After a period of sustained lobbying on the part of the MEAA, ethnic groups and the Communication Law Centre, a set of Advisory Notes relating to the portrayal of cultural diversity were finally released by FACTS in August 1994. There continued to be a level of dissatisfaction expressed by most of those involved in the cultural diversity debate, however there were no changes made to the 1993 code and the revised FACTS Code of Practice in 1999. The 1999 Australian Content Standard also retained the same clauses with regard to the portrayal of cultural diversity.

Aims

This project updates research undertaken in the early 1990s concerned with the portrayal of cultural diversity on television, with an emphasis on the acting profession. This research is the first study to carry out a comprehensive survey with a focus on industry professional practice related to casting for commercial television drama. While industry perspectives inform the research, the relationship of the study to the BSA is also important. One of its 10 'Objects', BSA Objects.3 (e) is 'to promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity'. This wording is also to be found in the Object of the current Australian Content Standard, which prescribes amounts of first release drama for commercial television, amongst other things. Both the Act and the Australian Content Standard express the desire that broadcasters facilitate the development and representation of cultural diversity in the community, through their programming.

Local drama programming in particular has been identified as a very popular media form through ratings success, and importantly, audiences consider it to be very effective in 'presenting and promoting cultural diversity'.[7] The quantitative results of this study thus allow for a bounded evaluation of the commercial broadcasters performance with regard to meeting Object 3 (e) of the BSA and the Object of the Australian Content Standard. While the objective of cultural diversity is the paramount concern here, the industrial indicator of employment is taken as an important measure of movement towards this policy goal.

The core component of the study was a casting snapshot of Australian commercial drama series and serials that were produced in July–October 1999. The focus was on sustaining cast, or those members of the cast who regularly appeared in the program. While it was considered desirable to survey guest cast, this proved difficult due to the transitory nature of these performers on set. The programs surveyed were: *Water Rats* and *Stingers* broadcast on the Nine network, *Blue Heelers, All Saints* and *Home and Away* broadcast on the Seven network, and *Neighbours* and *Breakers* broadcast on network Ten (as of the week beginning 8 November 1999, *Breakers* was no longer screened on Ten).

As an additional indicator of the portrayal of cultural diversity on commercial drama, a two-week content analysis of the seven programs surveyed was

undertaken in September 1999. This was deemed necessary to determine if actors from culturally diverse backgrounds were playing roles that were either specific to their cultural background or non-ethnic specific. It was also an opportunity to monitor for story lines, which were concerned with Australia's cultural diversity. Semi-structured interviews with the program's respective casting directors and other key production personnel provided insights and explanations for the quantitative data.

Policy Context

The aspiration for Australian television to reflect an Australian presence had been expressed before television services actually began in 1956. The 1942 *Broadcasting Act* invited licensees to use the services of Australians in the production and presentation of programs. In 1954, the Royal Commission on Television resolved 'that there was an obligation on television stations to make the best use of Australian talent'.[8] The period between the 1950s and late 1990s saw an evolution of policy intervention into Australian content on commercial television, as a means of securing some level of local television drama production.

From 1967, when the Australian Broadcasting Control Board set the first quota for local drama at 2 hours per 28 days to the current points system of the Australian Content Standard, the implication has been that the enforced regulation of locally produced drama will be a contributing factor in fostering a national industry. However, it is the explicit articulation of cultural and social objectives rather than industry facilitation, which now drive policy and resultant debate. Already in the era of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT), the ABT was made aware of the cultural and social implications of television in constructing a sense of national identity. In the 1988 *Report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee*,[9] there is an endorsement for local drama to have a 'predominantly Australian look'. After frustration for the ABT in the 1980s with attempts to establish a system for measuring an Australian look, the ABA instigated a creative elements test, which focused on the 'who' rather than the 'what' of content. The creative elements test defines what constitutes an Australian program by setting parameters of creative input involving the key production personnel on any program. Under this scheme, a program is deemed Australian if, for example, the producer, writer and majority of actors are Australians.

With the release of the *Broadcasting Services Act* in 1992, the ABT's system of public hearings into licence renewals was replaced by a more self-regulatory broadcasting environment, including a new approach to content regulation. The ABA also oversees the development and registering of industry codes of practice. Such codes are meant to provide the community with an instrument for making complaints about the service. The FACTS code is intended to 'regulate the content of commercial television in accordance with current community standards'.[10] It is mostly concerned with matters related to classification of programs and amounts of time occupied by non-programming matter, including advertising. The codes of practice for the ABC and SBS however, contain clear and detailed articulations for the representation of various groups in the community, including people from indigenous and non-English speaking background. The FACTS code contains Advisory Notes for the portrayal of cultural diversity.

However, these notes are outside the scope of matters which can be referred to in complaints about commercial services.

Debating Cultural Diversity 1991–1994

While competition between the three commercial networks is strong, commercial television broadcasters have nevertheless been granted a degree of protection from an open market, in return for compliance with a number of conditions placed on them. Of interest to this research are those conditions which regulate for a quota of locally produced drama. It is important to note that Object 3 (e) of the BSA 1992 is not limited in its scope to drama programming. Investigations of issues of cultural diversity could also be extended to all genres of programming. However, the most contested and regulated genre happens to be drama for reasons of its cultural value and its ability to be replaced by imported product.

Any evaluation of how broadcasters have or have not met the cultural and social objectives of content regulation is extremely difficult to empirically gauge without reference to industrial indicators such as employment. This is particularly so when it comes to assessing whether local content quota programming has contributed to developing and reflecting cultural diversity. In the early 1990s, the Communication Law Centre and the MEAA, with assistance from the Office of Multicultural Affairs, began a campaign to address what they felt was a poor record of achievement when it came to the portrayal of cultural diversity in commercial television drama. While the portrayal of cultural diversity had been debated for many years before the early 1990s, it was the beginning of co-regulation under the new *Broadcasting Services Act 1992,* that acted as the catalyst for a period of debate and action around the issue of cultural diversity on commercial television.

The conferences and campaigns for an improved portrayal of cultural diversity were often a collaborative effort on the part of the guilds, government policy agents, academics and importantly, the Office of Multicultural Affairs (now defunct). Two years after a multiculturalism and scriptwriting seminar held at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, the lack of opportunities for ethnically diverse groups was again brought to the attention of a public forum at 'The Media and Indigenous Australians Conference' held in Brisbane in 1993. At this venue the MEAA revealed not a single Aboriginal actor had been cast in a lead role in a series or serial. Anne Britton noted that the FACTS draft Code of Practice and the Australian Content Standard, while addressing aspects of the public interest (such as decency), contained no facility to scrutinise portrayals of cultural diversity.[11] The lack of any real power the public would have in any consultative process in the new order of self-regulation was also noted. And so, as it had asked for in the previous five years, the MEAA once again proposed for a 'head count' of actors to determine the level of participation of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds as a means of improving the situation.

The MEAA's dissatisfaction with the new Code of Practice, combined with the energies of the CLC, resulted in a two year period of action to address the regulatory deficiencies. During this period, a CLC/MEAA working group was organised and possible scenarios for the inclusion of cultural diversity in future policy were put forward in a Background Paper. Such possibilities included a Cultural Diversity Standard or a Code of Practice relating to cultural diversity.[12]

The CLC (1993) Background Paper and related lobbying for a new standard or code drew varied responses from industry and policy organisations. In a letter

signed by 22 organisations including ethnic, indigenous and media advocacy groups, the CLC/MEAA presented Brian Johns (former Chair of the ABA) with research and community desire for an improved portrayal of cultural diversity.[13] In response, the ABA was ambiguous in committing the ABA to any action, citing the constraints of the regulatory process. In relation to the new codes, Johns mentioned that the ABA was 'closely monitoring the progress of each sector'.[14] He also cited a section of the BSA and television code of practice which is used on occasion by a number of respondents in answering criticisms regarding the portrayal of cultural diversity—s123(3)(e), which relates to racial vilification. In reviewing the available material, one often finds the issue of the portrayal of cultural diversity with regard to television drama transferred into the distinct and separate issue of anti-vilification legislation. Both the ABA and FACTS cited the inclusion of anti-vilification discourse as somehow addressing the lack of NESB and indigenous Australians in television drama.

The MEAA/CLC letter was subsequently released to the media and a story in the *Sydney Morning Herald* appeared titled 'TV chief says ethnic quotas not practical'.[15] Tony Branigan (FACTS) suggested in the article rather mischievously that quotas for 'ethnic' performers would be impractical to administer. The tactic of raising the issue of an 'ethnic quota' has obviously been effective for FACTS, as concern over such a possibility eventuating was sometimes raised in interviews during this research, in spite of the fact that quotas have never been on the agenda. In February 1994 the CLC, MEAA and FACTS met in order to discuss some form of resolution to the issue. It was at this time that an Advisory Note for the portrayal of cultural diversity emerged.

Finally in 1994, the MEAA once again put forward a model of unofficial monitoring for the roles and actor participation of performers from culturally diverse backgrounds.[16] FACTS responded to the letter by mentioning that the soon to be released Advisory Note would contain a specific provision for the television industry to take note in the scripting and casting of roles for a complex and culturally diverse Australia. They rejected the need for monitoring.[17]

Research Context

Probably the best known research in the area of multiculturalism and the media in the 1990s is the 1994 book *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media.*[18] This research project examined a broad range of issues within print and broadcast media, news, advertising, the SBS, children's TV and included research carried out for government agencies. The core methodology was analysis of particular media in order to reveal 'media practices as well as their social context'.[19] However, audience surveys, interviews with media industry workers and public seminars were also included in the research. Around the same period, four additional research projects were completed and published: (1) *The Representation of Non-English Speaking Background People on Australian Television Drama,*[20] a discussion paper prepared for Actors Equity by the Communications Law Centre; (2) *Next Door Neighbours,*[21] a report for the OMA, summarising a series of discussion groups held with ethnic groups about media representation; (3) *The People We See on TV*[22] from the Australian Broadcasting Authority; and (4) *Multicultural Australia in the Media*[23] by Dr Philip Bell for the Office of Multicultural Affairs. The four projects do not have similar methodologies, so comparison between the studies is difficult. Nonetheless, they raise similar issues concerning the lack of participation for actors

of culturally diverse backgrounds and an impoverished representation of Australia's cultural diversity.

Casting Snapshot Survey—Method

A questionnaire survey was administered by myself and MEAA representatives to cast on-site at the productions concerned. With assistance from the MEAA, four weeks was spent in Sydney and Melbourne to oversee the administration of the survey to as many performers as possible. Actors of culturally diverse backgrounds were divided into three groups for the purpose of the study: NESB 1 for those actors born overseas in an NESB country, and NESB 2 for those actors born in Australia with one or more parents born in an NESB country. Actors of Aboriginal or Torres Straits Islander background were given the opportunity to identify themselves as indigenous in a separate question. Actors were also given the opportunity to write their own comments on the issue of casting for a culturally diverse Australia. Survey responses were received and processed up until December 1999. Interviews were also conducted until December. Processing of the casting surveys involved coding questionnaire responses for converting to the SPSS software package for analysis.

Casting Snapshot Survey—Results

From a possible total of 88 actors, the ethnicity of 65 performers was established. Fifty (77%) were of English speaking background, 13 (20%) were of NESB background, made up of two NESB 1 (3%) and 11 NESB 2 actors (17%). Two performers (3%) were from Aboriginal background (see Figure 1).

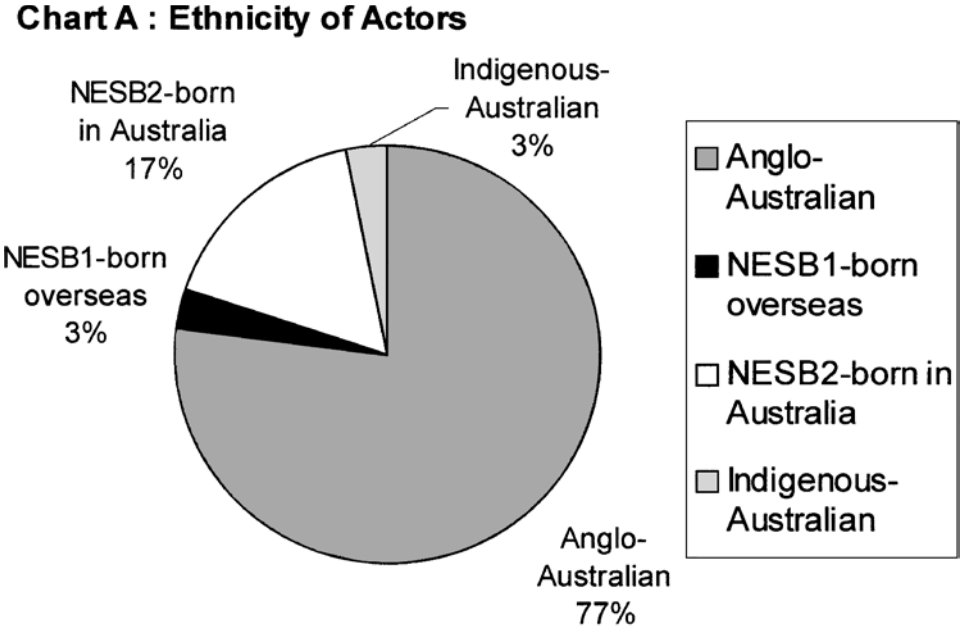

Figure 1. Ethnicity of actors.

The two most significant results compared with MEAA research from the early 1990s are the presence of Aboriginal performers in sustaining roles (up from none to 3%) and a total NESB presence of 20%, compared with 2% in the previous decade. The NESB outcome requires some discussion. It is significant that only two (or 3%) of actors were born in non-English speaking countries, according to the current research. ABS data for 1998 illustrates that the comparable percentage for this group in the Australian community is approximately 14%.[24] Clearly, those born overseas in non-English speaking countries are not well represented in Australian commercial drama. A more positive result is that for NESB 2 actors. According to ABS figures, Australians who have one or both parents born in non-English speaking regions as identified in the 1996 Census data (NESB 2) made up approximately 10% of the total population. However it should be noted that such a figure is an approximation only. Thus the 17% figure in this survey represents a better than statistical approximation of these second generation immigrants than occurs in the community.

Table 1 provides three comparisons for performers of culturally diverse backgrounds: (1) the results of the 1992 MEAA survey; (2) the current survey; and (3) the statistical representation of these groups in the general population.

Table 1 demonstrates the continuing poor representation of NESB 1 actors (those born overseas) working in drama, as compared with this group in the general population. The other two groups fare much better. The other significant data collected was the birthplace of NESB performers. Table 2 shows the regional origins of NESB 1 and NESB 2 actors.

Table 1. Comparison of studies

Group	1992 MEAA survey[a]	1999 survey	General population
NESB 1	2%	3%	14%
NESB 2	–	17%	10%
Indigenous	0%	3%	2%

[a] The figure of 2% in the MEAA research represents both NESB 1 and NESB 2 actors.
Source: CLC, *op. cit.*; OMA, *op. cit.*

Table 2. Family background by region

Region	Mother	Father
Pacific	1	1
Western Europe	1	3
Eastern Europe	3	3
Mediterranean	2	1
Middle East	0	1
Scandinavia	0	2

Note: the total of 13 NESB actors provided a total of 18 parents born overseas.

What is very significant for the research is that no sustaining actor was from an Asian background. This compares with an Asian born (NESB 1) population in Australia of 5%[25] and an estimated Asian NESB 2 population of 2%.[26] The research would seem to support the notion that it is children from the longer established migrant groups who are able to negotiate their way in the profession and industry, in order to achieve the level of sustainer. The possible reasons for this are discussed below.

Content Analysis

The seven programs under study were recorded for a two-week period from 13 to 24 September 1999. This represents 38 hours of programming. This sample of programming offers a somewhat limited scope for making significant findings. However, from my own experience and familiarity with the programmes, the two weeks under analysis are representative. No NESB 1 or 2 sustaining cast member was involved in a role which referred to their ethnicity. There were, however, four NESB guest roles across the seven shows which were related to the ethnicity of the actor, that is they were ethnic-specific roles. There were also several guest roles played by NESB actors which were non-specific. With respect to the roles played by the two Aboriginal actors, no reference was made in the programs to their cultural background—i.e. they played non-specific parts in their respective programs.

On the one hand there was a total lack of reference to sustaining actors' ethnicity or cultural background. All seven programs have sustaining cast of NESB background. However, when it comes to guest roles and guest cast, one finds that stories are more likely to be ethnically based. NESB actors noted in interview and commented in writing that they do not wish to have their ethnic background foregrounded. Rather, they desire to play non-specific roles. It should be remembered that the great majority of NESB actors surveyed are second generation migrants. Therefore, the overwhelming non-specific nature of roles for NESB actors is in accordance with actors' wishes. On the other hand, guest roles are much more likely to utilise such cultural elements as accent, attitude and appearance, in order to engage with a multicultural story.

Industry Perspectives

Casting directors interviewed were unanimous in the belief that there had been a significant increase in the number of tertiary trained acting graduates from culturally diverse backgrounds throughout the 1990s. The relationship between the drama schools and the portrayal of cultural diversity is as follows: there was the suggestion that NESB graduates of the acting schools will predominantly be young *second generation* migrants. Thus emerging NESB actors from the schools will most likely speak with no accent. As Asian immigration is more recent than the wave of post-war European immigration, it is likely that the number of second generation migrants from Asian background will be less than their non-English speaking European counterparts. In interview with several actors of Asian background, there was also cautious agreement that in some Asian communities, acting and creative careers in general are not highly valued, making acting a less likely career for children of Asian parents. However, the point was made that while there may be a smaller pool of Asian actors available, there are most certainly more actors available than the number of sustainers appearing on television. While the pool of available

actors from culturally diverse backgrounds may be of a certain size, the chances for significant employment also depend upon a complex set of subjective factors described by casting directors as being 'right' for the role, having the 'essence' of the character, and particularly in television, having 'good looks', which a network marketing department can utilise.

Conclusion

It would appear that improvements in the participation of actors from culturally diverse backgrounds have been due, in part, to a permeating through of second-generation migrants into the acting profession. Respondents were familiar with the notion of improving the portrayal of cultural diversity and were sympathetic to the obstacles faced by actors from culturally diverse backgrounds. At a conscious level, key stakeholders did not think that policy interventions, previous lobbying or academic research surrounding the issue of cultural diversity had provided any significant impetus for transformative casting practice in the production of commercial drama. However, there was agreement that in the last 10 years, change has been both necessary and welcome. Two producers expressed the view that it was an awareness of multiculturalism as an encompassing social actuality that had spurred change at the level of professional practice. At the level of the individual, industry personnel in writing, producing and casting may often take the initiative to increase opportunities for actors of culturally diverse backgrounds. A wealth of examples provided in interviews demonstrated an industry keen to improve the portrayal of cultural diversity. However, writers may often write into drama series both ethnic specific and non-specific roles, but by the time such roles pass through casting and network approval, compromises are sometimes made.

If, as one casting director mentioned, networks have 'ultimate control', a significant commitment from networks to cultural diversity would send a message to the production industry as a whole, that cultural diversity be given serious consideration in all production. In the USA, all major television networks have made agreements with a coalition of minority interest groups to improve the employment levels for minorities. Measures include setting and meeting equity targets, providing minority fellowships in various professions across program genres within the industry and perhaps most importantly, linking the attainment of diversity measures to management bonuses. At a policy level in Australia, it may be time for community and advocacy groups to renew vigour in lobbying the ABA and FACTS to include a section on cultural diversity within the Code of Practice for commercial television, when the code next comes up for review. Such a measure may be deemed unpopular in industry and policy environments where regulatory intervention and the portrayal of cultural diversity is considered unworkable, but the question needs to be asked whether we should continually wait a generation before more recent member groups of the community finally make it on to the television screen.

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